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ABSTRACT

University and college English departments, preoccupied with literary study, have long neglected their role in teacher preparation, especially the training of college composition teachers. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic are studies more valuable to the composition teacher than courses in imaginative literature. The weighting of curriculum in favor of literature and literary analysis is reflected not only in the general unpreparedness of newly graduated composition teachers, but in textbooks, anthologies, and doctoral programs as well. Recent studies suggest that momentum is gathering for changes toward a more communications-based curriculum. (KS)

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Comp. vs. Lit. -- What's the Score?

George R. Bramer

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What's REALLY basic about training teachers of Composition is giving them some understanding of Composition. If that statement sounds absurd, I can only say that the observation it makes seems often to have been overlooked or ignored. Composition involves things like grammar, rhetoric and logic, but often Composition teachers have not formally studied any. People applying for positions in Composition programs I have supervised frequently have submitted transcripts listing English courses only in literary history and criticism. The people who were already teaching in those programs usually had similar backgrounds. Programs created recently to train English teachers for two-year and four-year colleges, rather than to give traditional advanced degrees in English, give some attention to Composition teaching--but often less than you might guess. The apparent excess of literature courses in the training of Composition teachers, I believe, has had unfortunate results for Composition students. Recently some resistance to that state of affairs has set in, and a real conflict between "Lit" and "Comp" has developed. Advocates of traditional literary training for all English teachers have long had command of the English profession, and proponents of increased Composition training have had difficulty scoring points. But now the Comp side has new momentum. The score is changing.

CS 202 630

Probably no perfect list of courses for Composition teacher training programs is available. Nevertheless, we can put together a considerable list of subjects which appear to be more valuable than medieval or Victorian poetry for Composition teachers. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic are just three of those subjects. Others are semantics, dialects, lexicography, library science, orthography, punctuation, usage. We can add learning theory, language acquisition, nature and philosophy of language, history of the English language, instructional technology and design, testing and evaluation theory, interpersonal and small-group communication. The list goes on: English as a second language, the teaching of reading, business communications, technical writing, visual literacy, mass media. Daniel Dieterich, who chairs the N.C.T.E. Committee on Public Doublespeak, has indicated still more areas--for teachers dealing with public persuasion: the psychology of attitude formation and motivation, advertising in marketing, media production, anthropology, ethics.[1] Our list of subjects for Composition teachers to study has grown long, but you need only look more closely at almost any one of those subjects to realize how much of value really is there, and how great the challenge really is. For example, Edward P. J. Corbett's contribution to a symposium in Rhetoric at Texas Women's University in 1974 outlines the wide range of recent contributions in the area of rhetoric.[2] I think we could rather easily identify thirty semester-long courses which would be valuable preparation for Composition teaching--or, a bit more broadly, for teaching basic communication--without including a single course in imaginative literature. (I do not mean to imply, however, that such courses should be entirely excluded.)

In helping recruit teachers for Composition programs at two or three institutions, I have searched for people thoroughly prepared to do that teaching. It would be a delight to find just one person with a profile

closely resembling the one suggested by the list of courses I have given. But I do not recall having found that person yet. I have found a lot of people with courses in British literature from Beowulf to Anthony Burgess, and American literature from Jonathan Edwards to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. And some have courses in Comparative Tragedy, Great Epics, Folklore, Prosody, Russian Novels, or Oriental Poetry. They've had Black Literature, African Literature, Chicano Literature, South American Literature, Theater of the Absurd, Black Humor, and Foreign Cinema. But the hundreds and hundreds of files I've seen would probably show, on the average, no more than one or two of the courses I've suggested for a Composition teacher. I exclude many of those sent during the last two years in response to our notices in MLA and 4 C's vacancy lists indicating some possible openings, and stipulating "No literature specialists" since our department is not responsible for a literature program. But even those responding to these notices have had a preponderance of literary study in their course work. And among those who consider themselves writing specialists, a surprisingly large number have a profile something like this: graduate English courses exclusively in literature; some poems published in obscure magazines; and some teaching experience, perhaps as a T.A., in Freshman Composition. Now and then such a person will claim to have had unusual success teaching writing, perhaps to developmental students. It's possible, but pardon my skepticism.

The people teaching in the Composition programs I've supervised--myself included--generally have had the same kind of typical, traditional literary training as most of the applicants I have just described. At one university, however, I was instrumental in getting some people hired with atypical training, and with an unusual interest in teaching Composition exclusively. One had concentrated on linguistics in her English degree work, and two had completed a community college English teacher training program. None had

doctorates or A.B.D.'s and because of their degrees all accepted terminal contracts. These hirings drew considerable adverse reactions in the department even though it had a real morale problem among Composition teachers eager to become literature teachers. When it appeared that the new members had performed remarkably well in their first year, I began to try for some additional, similar appointments. One department member, seeming to reflect others' views as well as his own, complained that we already had "four rhetoricians." He clearly regarded that number as enough or too many in a staff of about ninety, even though more than fifty percent of the department's teaching was in Composition. At Lansing Community College it's smoother going. Our department's English offerings are almost all in Composition, and people with atypical backgrounds are extremely welcome. Last year we were able to hire two such people, and they're making fine contributions to our program.

All of the community college English teacher training programs which I'm aware of give some attention to preparation for Composition teaching. I think that is also true of D.A. programs, designed to prepare college English teachers rather than researchers and scholars. But I have seen various transcripts of graduates from both kinds of programs, and some of them indicate only one or two courses in matters directly related to teaching Composition. I recently heard a presentation about a fairly new D.A. program and was pleased to hear the speaker say it emphasizes the teaching of writing. Later I picked up a publicity brochure for the program, and found it started with a poetic allusion and then offered this sentence: "If you're interested in continuing your education, and you're excited about poetry, novels, classics and the genuine world of 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'--the English Department . . . invites you to study for the Doctor of Arts degree."[3] I could find no explicit reference to the teaching of writing in the entire brochure. Some of these new programs do go beyond a course or two about Composition in their requirements,

or at least in the options which they offer their students. Nevertheless, it is a rare transcript from one of those programs, among those I've seen, which does not show at least fifty percent of the course work in literature, even though virtually all of the individual's undergraduate work as an English major will have been in literature. An exception which delighted me was the record of an applicant who took the community college program at Central Michigan University after having earned a conventional M.A. in English. For the second M.A. he was able to take courses related to teaching Composition almost exclusively. We hired him.

I know of nothing in higher education to parallel the English profession's habit of assigning people to teach Composition even though they have little or no formal study in the substance of the course or in the content of the standard textbooks for the course. I am familiar with the argument that all those years of literary study are adequate, or even ideal, preparation for teaching Composition. And I strongly disagree with that argument. In fact, I argue that all the literary study often affects Composition teaching in adverse ways quite beyond the fact of teachers not being knowledgeable about the affairs of Composition. The problem, perhaps, is that often they think they are knowledgeable when actually they are not. Convinced that the finest things in writing, if not the only creditable ones, are imaginative literature, they often urge the strategies and styles of imaginative literature on all their students in virtually all their writing. Thus, those teachers almost always prefer (and reward) the subjective over the objective; the personal voice over the conventional or community voice; figurative language over literal language; irony and satire over forthright, unambiguous neutral statement. In fact, they sometimes prefer that their students submit poems or stories rather than essays in an expository writing class. No wonder that some students insist on calling everything except a poem a "story." Many Composition textbooks reflect the excessively literary orientation of teachers (who adopt texts) and perhaps of textbook authors.

Most rhetorics offer substantial sections on writing about literature, even though they give no special attention to writing about any other subject or area of inquiry. In the sections on writing research papers, literary topics prevail in the model papers. And, in rhetorics and handbooks, quoted material illustrating style and strategy is prevalently from imaginative literature or literary criticism. Anthologies of readings designed for the Composition course often have sprinklings of poetry and fiction, with or without some kind of rationale, and they sometimes contain a section of literary criticism.

The movement toward getting really serious and responsible in Composition teaching is spreading, and it includes an appeal for sounder and more thorough preparation of Composition teachers. In 1969, a study prepared by Richard J. Worthen and Michael F. Shugrue, and published by the ERIC Clearinghouse, indicated that English teachers in two-year colleges considered techniques in teaching composition the thing most needed to improve instruction.[4] A similar but very recent study among two-year college English departments in Texas was conducted by Charles R. Kline, Jr., Roland Huff, and James L. Kinneavy.[5] Its results are even more interesting than those of the earlier study. In discussions of programs to train two-year college English teachers, respondents in Texas indicated that teaching rhetoric and composition is one of their two top concerns. (The other is "Reading Skills.")[6] They also indicated, according to the authors of the study, that "Literature and literary criticism should be de-emphasized" (but not eliminated).[7]

The thought of a conflict between literature and Composition may be painful to many people in our profession. Some may deny that there is any real conflict. However, they might look at Ray Kytle's 1971 CCC article, called "Slaves, Serfs, or Colleagues--Who Shall Teach College Composition?"[8] I think there is a conflict, all right. I am in a department which has virtually no literature program, but which did have one until, less then three years ago,

the literature staff and program moved to the Humanities Department. I was not around at the time, but I've picked up enough to say there was conflict between literature and Composition. These items may be some other confirming signs: some community colleges in Texas are developing their own English teacher training program.[9] And these days you can hear it remarked that some things are strange in University English departments: they're beginning to train community college English teachers, even for Composition teaching to some extent, but generally they continue to do their research in areas of imaginative literature; they've decided community college English teachers need at least a little special preparation for Composition teaching, but they're satisfied to continue in their own Composition programs with budding literateurs who lack similar training, and will not receive it.

It does not seem excessive to say that university and college English departments in this country, being preoccupied with literary study, have long neglected their role in teacher preparation, especially the training of Composition teachers. But it also seems accurate to say that those things are changing. Maybe more university and college professors will begin to do serious study and research in the teaching of Composition and related areas, in order to offer sound training to Composition teachers. Maybe they will begin, more regularly, to be given full recognition and reward for those efforts. Certainly the English profession has a challenge to face, because in the conflict between Comp and Lit, the score really is changing.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Daniel Dieterich, "Training College Students as Critical Receivers of Public Persuasion," Teaching about Doublespeak, ed. Daniel Dieterich, National Council of Teachers of English: Urbana, Illinois, 1976, p. 197.

2. Edward P. J. Corbett, "Rhetoric, Whether Goest Thou?" A Symposium in Rhetoric, ed. J. Dean Bishop, Turner S. Kobler, and William E. Tanner, Committee for the Federation Degree Program in English of the Federation of North Texas Area Universities, 1975, pp. 44-56.

3. Publicity brochure for Drake University Doctor of Arts program in English, no date.

4. Richard J. Worthen and Michael F. Shugrue, The Focus Report on the National Study of English in the Junior College, ERIC Clearinghouse on the Teaching of English in Higher Education, 1969, quoted in Gregory Cowan, et al., "Guidelines for Junior College English Teacher Training Programs," CCC, XXII (1971), 304.

5. Charles R. Kline, Jr., Roland Huff, and James L. Kinneavy, "Considerations in Program Design: Training the Two-Year College Teacher," ADE Bulletin, 48 (February, 1976), pp. 45-47.

6. Kline, Huff, and Kirneavy, p. 47.

7. Kline, Huff, and Kinneavy, p. 46.

8. Ray Kytle, "Slaves, Serfs, or Colleagues -- Who Shall Teach College Composition?" CCC, XXII (1971), 339-341.

9. Philip W. Senas, "The Search for Skilled Teachers," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 29, 1975, p.3.